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Implementation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification

Report of the Secretary-General

CONTENTS

		Paragraphs	Page
I.	INTRODUCTION	1 - 2	2
II.	EVALUATION OF PROGRESS ACHIEVED IN IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN OF ACTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION	3 - 9	2
III.	EXPERT STUDIES ON FINANCING ANTI-DESERTIFICATION PROGRAMMES	10 - 15	5
IV.	SPECIAL ACCOUNT FOR DESERTIFICATION CONTROL AND THE CONSULTATIVE GROUP FOR DESERTIFICATION CONTROL	16 - 24	7
	A. Special Account	16 - 17	7
	B. The Consultative Group for Desertification Control	18 - 24	8
V.	EVALUATION OF THE UNEP/UNDP JOINT VENTURE	25 - 27	10

* A/46/50.

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report has been prepared pursuant to General Assembly resolution 44/172 A of 19 December 1989, entitled "Implementation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification", in which the Secretary-General, together with the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), are requested to submit a report to the General Assembly at its forty-sixth session, through the Economic and Social Council, on the various provisions of the resolution. In the same resolution, the Assembly requested that the report be submitted, immediately after publication, to the Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. The present report should be read in conjunction with the report of UNEP on the implementation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification, which will be submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolutions 32/172 of 19 December 1977 and 40/209 of 17 December 1985.

2. At its forty-fourth session, the General Assembly, deeply concerned by the continuing spread and intensification of desertification in developing countries, adopted resolution 44/172 which, among the several measures that it called for, underlined the imperative need to address desertification in the framework of the interdependence of nations. In that regard, the Assembly invited the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development to be held in 1992, to accord high priority to desertification control and to deploy all means necessary, including financial, scientific and technological resources, to halt and reverse the process of desertification. The present report reviews the work of the Executive Director of UNEP and the Administrator of UNDP in implementing the provisions contained in Assembly resolution 44/172 A, which will contribute to the preparatory process for the Conference in 1992.

II. EVALUATION OF PROGRESS ACHIEVED IN IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN OF ACTION TO COMBAT DESERTIFICATION

3. The General Assembly, in its resolution 32/172, approved the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification adopted by the United Nations Conference on Desertification held at Nairobi from 23 August to 9 September 1977. 1/ The Plan of Action specified (para. 9) that "the seven-year period 1978-1984 has been chosen for the implementation of the immediate actions required and as an indication of the time at which a first general assessment of progress could be made". In accordance with Assembly resolution 32/172, and following the subsequent UNEP Governing Council decision 9/12 A of 26 May 1981 and section VIII of its decision 11/1 of 24 May 1983, as well as Assembly resolution 38/165 of 19 December 1983, the Executive Director of UNEP presented his report on the general assessment of progress in the implementation of the Plan of Action, 1978-1984 to the Governing Council of UNEP at its twelfth session. 2/ The Governing Council, after consideration of

the report, adopted it, and in its decision 12/10 of 28 May 1984, authorized the Executive Director to transmit it, together with its own views, to the General Assembly. The Assembly, having considered the views of the Governing Council of UNEP, adopted resolution 39/168 A of 17 December 1984, in which it "notes with great concern that, during the seven years since the United Nations Conference on Desertification in 1977, desertification has continued to spread and intensify in developing countries, particularly in Africa". In the same resolution, the Assembly endorsed the decision of the Governing Council of UNEP that a further overall assessment of progress in the implementation of the Plan of Action should be carried out in 1992.

4. In its resolution 44/172 A, the General Assembly has invited the Governing Council of UNEP to contribute substantially to the discussion on desertification at the United Nations Conference in 1992, inter alia, by undertaking a general evaluation of the progress achieved in implementing the Plan of Action. In his report to the Governing Council on the first general assessment, 1978-1984, the Executive Director pointed out that "information about the status and trends of desertification in various parts of the drylands has been shown in this assessment to be inadequate, and hence constitutes a major handicap to the planning of actions under the Plan". 3/ In reviewing General Assembly resolution 39/168 A, which also required a further overall assessment of progress in implementation of the Plan of Action to be carried out by 1992, the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) noted that global assessment of desertification and preparation of a thematic atlas of desertification will constitute key components of the report on general evaluation. ACC further invited UNEP "to continue using the designated officials for environmental matters and the Inter-Agency Working Group on Desertification (IAWGD) mechanisms to keep the subject of assessment of desertification under constant review". 4/

5. In carrying out the assessment, UNEP has attached high priority to cooperating with competent institutions and those United Nations bodies with expertise in methods of assessing and mapping desertification. In order to consolidate views on assessment methodologies, UNEP held an ad hoc consultation meeting in February 1990. This meeting agreed on the following working definition of desertification: Desertification is land degradation in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas resulting from adverse human impact. A technical advisory group, composed of scientists from regional and national research institutions, was set up, and it met in May and November 1990, with a third meeting scheduled for May 1991. This group has provided guidance on the assessment process, the content, the structure and the design of the World Atlas of Thematic Maps on Desertification, which will be the published medium of the global assessment of the status and trends of desertification. This atlas contains a world map at an approximate scale of 1:10 million, which will show relevant indicators or factors of desertification/land degradation.

6. The global and regional section of the world atlas contains maps based on bioclimatic and soil degradation aspects in arid, semi-arid and dry sub-humid areas. Information on vegetation and population are also included. The

national/local section features methodological approaches in desertification/land degradation mapping in Argentina, China, Kenya, Mali, the Syria 'rab Republic, Tunisia and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

7. The atlas also contains the first systematic approach on mapping thematic indicators of desertification at global, regional and national levels. However, there will still be considerable scope for improvement through the compilation of more detailed data sets, especially the ones related to the socio-economic aspects of desertification.

8. For the general evaluation of progress in implementing the Plan of Action, the Executive Director intends to submit a composite report under the title "Status of desertification and implementation of the United Nations Plan of Action to Combat Desertification". The report is currently under preparation and will include four main components:

(1) World status of desertification

(a) Status assessment report on the basis of the atlas and other relevant data;

(b) Annex: World Atlas of Thematic Maps on Desertification (see paras. 5 to 7 above).

(2) The United Nations Plan of Action to Combat Desertification

(a) External evaluation of the Plan of Action;

(b) Implementation of the Plan of Action, 1978-1991:

(i) Coordination of the implementation of the Plan of Action and actions by UNEP; country-level successes/failures;

(ii) Contributions of the United Nations system and international community;

(iii) Analysis of constraints pertaining to the implementation of the recommendations of the Plan of Action.

(3) Revised Plan of Action

(a) Principles of the strategy to implement the Plan of Action;

(b) Course of action;

(c) Coordination of international cooperation:

(i) Objectives and courses of action;

(ii) Evaluation of additional resources;

(iii) Financial arrangements;

(iv) Institutional arrangements.

(4) Financing of the Plan of Action

Financing desertification programmes, summary of past experiences (for example, the Consultative Group for Desertification Control and the Special Account) and new trends.

9. The above components of the report are being compiled in cooperation with national Governments, members of IAWGD, scientific institutions and major non-governmental organizations. As these components will in themselves be a synthesis of several support studies, the Executive Director reported to the second special session of the Governing Council of UNEP that he anticipates that the report will be ready by early 1992. 5/

III. EXPERT STUDIES ON FINANCING ANTI-DESERTIFICATION PROGRAMMES

10. The General Assembly, in its resolution 44/172 A, requested the Secretary-General, in consultation with the Executive Director of UNEP, to submit to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, through its preparatory committee, a report containing relevant expert studies on, inter alia: (a) proposals on new methods to finance new programmes at the global level, over and above regular and extrabudgetary sources; (b) state of implementation of objectives of the Plan of Action and additional resources needed to attain the minimum objectives of combating desertification; (c) loans obtained on concessional terms from Governments and other sources; (d) strengthening and coordinating the activities of funds established in various international institutions; (e) transfer of potential technology for combating desertification and its transfer on favourable terms; (f) reducing the impact of desertification by reafforestation through mechanisms involving reduction of external debts; and (g) financing by non-governmental organizations, foundations and individuals of training and scientific research programmes for combating desertification, including reafforestation.

11. In its resolution 32/172, the General Assembly invited the Governing Council of UNEP "to have prepared, by a small group of high-level specialists in international financing of projects and programmes, a study of additional measures and means of financing for the implementation of the Plan of Action, and to submit a final report on the subject of additional measures of financing to the General Assembly". After consideration of the study submitted to the Assembly at its thirty-third session (1978) by the Secretary-General, and as a continuing search for a solution to the problem of

financing the Plan of Action, the Assembly subsequently requested a second study (1980) and a third study (1981). The three successive studies have attempted an evaluation of the feasibility and practicability of the specific proposals for new and innovative means of financing mooted from time to time within the United Nations system. However, none of the recommendations stemming from these studies have been adopted by the General Assembly, particularly the recommendation in the important second study (A/35/396, annex) for the establishment of an independent financial corporation that could provide finances on a concessionary basis to anti-desertification programmes.

12. It will be seen that the second study is similar in a number of aspects to the present study that the General Assembly is now requesting: certain elements are re-emphasized and certain other elements are brought forward deserving greater attention, in particular on the following elements:

(a) An evaluation of the present state of implementation of the Plan of Action, "including an evaluation of the additional resources needed in order to attain the minimum objectives of the struggle against desertification";

(b) Research into potential technology to combat desertification and its transfer on favourable terms to developing countries;

(c) Impact of reduction of external debt on desertification, including reafforestation, through external debt cancellation mechanisms;

(d) Strengthening and coordinating the activities of funds established in international institutions, so as to contribute to anti-desertification programmes;

(e) Active participation of non-governmental organizations, foundations and individuals in financing of training and scientific research programmes for combating desertification, including reafforestation.

13. The Executive Director of UNEP convened two international meetings of experts to assist in drafting the studies required by the General Assembly. The outlines corresponding to the seven areas of study requested in General Assembly resolution 44/172 A were set out by a group of technical experts under the respective topics at a meeting convened by the Executive Director at Geneva, in July 1990. The drafts were revised and elaborated by a group of high-level international finance experts at a second meeting convened by the Executive Director at UNEP headquarters, at Nairobi, from 21 to 23 February 1991. A third meeting is planned for July 1991.

14. In preparation of the studies, the Executive Director has focused attention on the following set of issues that have guided and will guide the expert groups in their deliberations on the expert studies called for by the General Assembly:

(a) The place of combating desertification (implementation of the United Nations Plan of Action to Combat Desertification) in the agenda of international actions related to environment and development of land-and-water resources of the world (food security and satisfaction of basic needs of the increasing populations of the world;

(b) Cost of implementing a world-wide programme for combating desertification, and the financial and technical assistance required to support implementation of national programmes in developing countries;

(c) What sources of funds can become available for global environment-and-development programmes, and what share of these resources could be appropriated from combating desertification;

(d) What existing mechanisms could be further developed or what mechanism(s) could be created to manage the processes of mobilizing the financial and technical resources required to address global environment-and-development issues, including issues related to the world drylands.

Conclusion

15. The group of experts endeavoured to make the study self-contained in responding to the request of the General Assembly concerning the seven topics enumerated in its resolution 44/172 A. The proposals outlined in the report explore ideas and proposals of likely ways and means of mobilizing resources needed for financing international programmes addressing global issues of environment and development. Programmes for combating desertification deserve their share of these resources.

IV. SPECIAL ACCOUNT FOR DESERTIFICATION CONTROL AND THE CONSULTATIVE GROUP FOR DESERTIFICATION CONTROL

A. Special Account

16. The Special Account for Desertification Control was set up in accordance with General Assembly resolution 32/172 and resolution 33/89 of 15 December 1978 for the purpose of financing of the national, subregional and regional projects within the framework of implementation of the Plan of Action. As at 31 December 1988, a total of 166,886 dollars had been paid into the Account by the Governments of Australia, Chile, Mexico, Panama, Sierra Leone and the Sudan. With interest added to the collections, the Account stood at 245,157 dollars.

17. At its fifteenth session, the Governing Council of UNEP, after consideration of the report of the Executive Director, 6/ recommended to the General Assembly that the United Nations Special Account to finance the implementation of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification be

abolished, 7/ in view of the low level of the contributions to it. By its resolution 44/172 A, the Assembly, taking note of the relevant section of the report of the Governing Council of UNEP, 8/ decided to close the Special Account to finance the implementation of the Plan of Action, and requested the Executive Director of UNEP to take the necessary steps to do so. The Executive Director has taken appropriate action to close the Special Account by allocating the remaining balance, which as at 31 January 1991 stood at 313,854 dollars, on the preparation of the expert studies requested by the Assembly in paragraph 7 of its resolution 44/172 A, as reported above.

B. The Consultative Group for Desertification Control

18. The Consultative Group for Desertification Control was set up by the General Assembly in its resolutions 32/172 and 33/89, with the specific mandate: (a) to assist the Executive Director of UNEP in mobilizing resources for the activities within the framework of implementing the Plan of Action; (b) to exchange information on the anti-desertification policies and programmes of its participants; and (c) to advise the Executive Director on related matters, including identifying constraints, possible solutions to problems, and measures required to improve the implementation of the Plan of Action regionally, and world wide. But the performance of the Consultative Group for Desertification Control in the discharge of this mandate was unsatisfactory, particularly in relation to assisting the Executive Director in mobilizing resources for implementation of the Plan of Action where it proved inadequate. As a consequence, the Assembly, in its resolution 42/189 C of 11 December 1987, requested the Executive Director to examine, in the context of the evaluation called for in Governing Council decision 14/15 C of 18 June 1987, ways and means of enhancing the efficiency of the Consultative Group, in pursuance of its mandate. Subsequently, at the sixth session of the Consultative Group, held at Geneva in March 1988, at the meeting of an ad hoc working group on the Consultative Group, held at Geneva in February 1988, and at a special session convened by the Executive Director of UNEP at Geneva, in November 1988, the comprehensive evaluation of the Consultative Group was carried out. In the evaluation, certain members advocated that the Consultative Group be discontinued, because attempts to restructure or reorient the institution were unlikely to succeed. Others, however, affirmed that the Consultative Group remains the only available world-wide mechanism for assisting in the mobilization of resources to support the implementation of the Plan of Action.

19. The Governing Council of UNEP, at its fifteenth session, recommended that the Consultative Group should hold sessions every two years to review the status of the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification and to exchange information on scientific research in this field, on national programmes and on implementation of the Plan of Action and to advise on further action against desertification. 9/ The General Assembly, taking note of the Governing Council recommendation, decided, in its resolution 44/172 A, that the Consultative Group will meet every year until the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development is held in 1992 and every two years

thereafter. The Assembly also reaffirmed the mandate of the Consultative Group, as contained in Assembly resolutions 32/172 and 39/168, namely, to contribute to enhancing the awareness of environmental issues, to mobilize additional resources to assist developing countries to finance anti-desertification programmes and to act as a forum for exchange of information on scientific research and implementation of the Plan of Action.

20. To implement General Assembly resolution 44/172 A, the Executive Director, in cooperation with the co-sponsors, convened the seventh regular session of the Consultative Group at the headquarters of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) in Rome, from 10 to 12 December 1990. The seventh session of the Group was attended by representatives of 23 Governments: Argentina, Australia, Bahrain, Denmark, France, Ghana, Italy, Japan, Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Mali, Mexico, New Zealand, Norway, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, United Republic of Tanzania, United States of America, Venezuela and Yemen, as well as 12 United Nations bodies and organizations: the Department of Technical Cooperation for Development, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, FAO, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the International Labour Organisation, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNEP, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO), IGADD and the Southern African Development Coordinating Conference. The main focus of the work of the session was on the future of the Consultative Group mechanism. The Consultative Group noted that the Group was a valuable instrument for global consideration of desertification matters exclusively, and that the future form of the Group should be in accordance with its actual function. The Consultative Group should remain as a forum for information exchange and policy advice.

21. The Consultative Group debated the Group's role in mobilization of resources for implementation of the Plan of Action, which was the original mandate of the Group. Representatives of the donor countries stressed that the Group has not been successful as a means for a direct mobilization of funds, and that they did not wish and would not use the Group for that purpose. They indicated that since the establishment of the Group, other and better mechanisms and means for obtaining such funding have been developed. Therefore, it was suggested that if the Group were to engage in resource mobilization, it should explore indirect means for resource mobilization: the Group could identify and discuss new and innovative sources of funding, for example, the Global Environmental Facility of the World Bank, UNDP and UNEP, or the proposals for new resource arrangements under conventions being negotiated, such as that for biological diversity.

22. On the desertification control process, the Consultative Group advised that UNEP should continue to assist in the development of national action plans and strengthen institutions within developing countries, with a view helping them obtain funding for their desertification control activities. The Consultative Group advised that the structure of the Group should be simple; membership should be open to Governments, international organizations and

regional institutions concerned with or interested in degradation of arid, semi-arid and sub-humid lands; the secretariat should remain small and efficient and exclusively in UNEP. An informal network of governmental and agency focal points was proposed for enhancing efficiency, responsiveness and coordination among the participants of the Group. It was also suggested that procedures and operations of other types of international bodies such as TFAP and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, etc. could offer models for the Consultative Group for improving its operations in future.

23. It was evident from the discussions at the seventh session of the Consultative Group that (a) representatives of developing countries looked forward to the Group as a mechanism to help and advise with mobilizing resources needed for the implementation of national plans for combating desertification, and (b) that representatives of the donor countries were against the idea of the Group being a forum for assisting in direct mobilization of financial and technical resources needed. These two very divergent opinions have characterized the debates in all the sessions of the Consultative Group during the last 12 years. As a consequence, the Group has been unable to fulfil its mandate to mobilize additional funds for desertification control.

Conclusion

24. The trend of discussion at the seventh session of the Consultative Group for Desertification Control seems to indicate that it is important either to alter the mandate of the Consultative Group to enable it to carry out a useful function of information exchange and coordination, or alternatively, if this is not desired, to abolish the Consultative Group altogether. If the Group is to be used as a forum for reviewing the status of desertification and evaluating the success and failures in the world endeavour to combat desertification, it would become one of several technical conferences, and it is questionable whether retaining the Group solely as a forum for discussing desertification issues would be cost-effective. If the mandate is not changed in this way the General Assembly may wish to consider that the Consultative Group be discontinued.

V. EVALUATION OF THE UNEP/UNDP JOINT VENTURE

25. The General Assembly in its resolution 44/172 B, requested the Executive Director of UNEP and the Administrator of UNDP to strengthen their common undertaking to support the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office (UNSO). The UNEP/UNDP joint venture was set up by the General Assembly, in its resolution 33/88 of 15 December 1978, by which it designated UNSO as the arm of the United Nations to be responsible for assisting the countries of the Sudano-Sahelian region to implement the Plan of Action to Combat Desertification. The Memorandum of Understanding, signed in January 1979 by the Executive Director of UNEP and the Administrator of UNDP, remains the modus operandi of the UNEP/UNDP joint venture under which UNSO coordinates

efforts of the United Nations system, on behalf of UNEP, in the implementation of the Plan of Action. General Assembly resolutions 35/72 of 5 December 1980, 36/190 of 17 December 1981, 39/168 of 17 December 1984 and 40/198 of 17 December 1985 have amended the original Assembly resolution 33/88 to include the present 22 countries which benefit from the assistance provided under the UNEP/UNDP joint venture. 10/

26. In order to comply with the General Assembly resolutions requesting them to strengthen their common support, the Executive Director of UNEP and the Administrator of UNDP jointly organized in 1990 an evaluation of the UNEP/UNDP joint venture, UNSO, in order to enable them to formulate the best areas requiring strengthening. The evaluation, conducted by independent consultants, found that the joint venture had contributed to: significant fund raising; increased awareness on desertification processes and effects in the 22 countries of the Sudano-Sahelian region; and, numerous successful programmes and projects. The evaluation recommended that the actions of the United Nations Sudano-Sahelian Office at the national level should continue and should be strengthened in order to assist Governments in the region in developing national Plans of Action and incorporating them into national plans for sustainable development; developing or strengthening relevant institutions; implementing replicable integrated projects and ensuring that the causes of desertification are addressed and not only the symptoms; using available financial resources effectively by avoiding duplication of activities and coordinating the anti-desertification activities undertaken by the international community in the region.

27. Based on the evaluation findings, UNDP and UNEP have initiated discussions on the programmatic aspects of the venture. The discussions should lead to a revised UNDP/UNEP memorandum of understanding and a strengthened programme for the biennium 1992-1993.

Notes

1/ A/CONF.74/36, chap. I.

2/ UNEP/GC.12/9 and Corr.1.

3/ Ibid., para. 36.

4/ UNEP/GC.15/8/Add.3, para. 24.

5/ UNEP/GC.SS.II/2, para. 36.

6/ UNEP/GC.15/9/Add.4.

7/ See Official Records of the General Assembly, Forty-fourth Session, Supplement No. 25 (A/44/25), annex I, Governing Council decision 15/23 of 25 May 1989.

8/ Ibid., chap. VI.

Notes (continued)

9/ Ibid., annex I, Governing Council decision 15/23 B of 25 May 1989.

10/ The countries are: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Chad, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Kenya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Sudan, Senegal, Somalia, Togo, United Republic of Tanzania and Uganda.